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SUBJECT: ANOTHER BORDER PROBLEM: JALISCO AND COLIMA SPAR OVER  
DISPUTED BOUNDARY

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¶1. Summary: Boundary issues are not solely confined to Mexico's international frontiers. A long-running land dispute between Colima and Jalisco has heated up in recent months, with both sides making sharp declarations and dispatching extra police forces to their common border. The Mexican Army has now been deployed to the disputed zone. While the possibility of violent conflict is remote, the tense situation is diverting attention and resources from other pressing issues, and complicating the ability of leaders in Colima and Jalisco to cooperate on projects for the good of both states. End Summary.

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A Long-Standing Dispute  
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¶2. The border between the states of Colima and Jalisco has been the subject of arguments and claims since the end of the colonial period, periodically surfacing as an issue and then fading away again depending on local circumstances. At its heart is a dispute over "ejidal" (communal) land known as "El Rebalse" which straddles the current state boundary between the municipalities of Cihuatlan (Jalisco) and Manzanillo (Colima's second largest city and most important port). The Mayor of Cihuatlan and other local officials insist that all of the communal lands should be reunified as part of Jalisco - a stance supported by many of the ejido residents but vehemently rejected by Colima. At its greatest extent, the disputed land (407 square kilometers) amounts to nearly nine percent of Colima's territory, including the Manzanillo Airport, an important iron mine, and valuable land along the Pacific Coast.

¶3. A number of attempts have been made to settle the dispute by judicial or legislative action. Jalisco's leaders have generally been confident of the legal merits of their case, and sought a Supreme Court decision in the mid-1980s only to see the effort blocked by then-President Miguel De La Madrid (coincidentally a native of Colima). Another attempt in 1997 also failed to produce a decision. Colima officials have tended to prefer a resolution by the Mexican Senate, where they believe they could have a fairer hearing. Neither avenue has so far yielded results.

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The Mouse That Roared  
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¶4. In the late Spring of 2007, Colima's Governor Jesus Cavazos (PRI) became concerned about growing "interference" by Cihuatlan authorities on his side of the boundary. In a declaration that even a member of his own cabinet called "very strident" Cavazos stated that he would not tolerate the situation and dispatched additional state police forces to the area to ensure that Colima's authority was respected. Coming from the leader of one of Mexico's smallest states in both area and population,

Cavazos' words and actions generated a media splash in Guadalajara and raised tensions in the disputed zone. Cihuatlan's mayor responded that his people would block roads and carry out other protests in defense of their "rights."

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Jalisco Uber Alles?  
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¶5. Colima's citizens and leaders are particularly galled by what they see as their much larger neighbor's attempt to cow them into giving up more territory. In conversation, some recall the size and grandeur of the indigenous Colima empire, conquered by the Spanish in the 16th Century. From that moment onward, Colima's size and importance declined while that of Jalisco grew. The pride (or arrogance, depending on one's residence) of Colima's northern neighbor also complicates matters. In a recent meeting, Colima's Minister of Tourism Sergio Bravo reminded the CG of a common local expression, "Jalisco Siempre Gana" (Jalisco Always Wins) noting that Jalisco residents did not confine it solely to sporting events. For that reason, he added, Governor Cavazos had to take a very tough stand on the boundary dispute to demonstrate that Colima would not be trifled with. In fairness, Jalisco also nurses some historical territorial grievances; in addition to Colima, all of Nayarit and parts of Aguascalientes, Michoacan, and Zacatecas were carved out of the colonial province that later became Jalisco.

¶6. Ego and pride are not the only factors at play here. Powerful economic interests are also involved. Manzanillo is pivotal for the economic growth of Colima, and the city's coastal areas have seen some significant resort development. Valuable iron deposits are also located in the zone. The adjoining Jalisco coast is less developed but is beginning to attract more attention from domestic and international investors.

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A Bridge Too Far  
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¶7. Jalisco's leaders responded to Cavazos' actions very mildly at first, with Lt. Governor Fernando Guzman declaring in March that any boundary problems could be resolved through dialogue. He informed the CG in April that Jalisco would prepare another legal case for submission to the Supreme Court, and he was confident his state would prevail. But as his attempts to broker talks between the two sparring municipalities failed (a bi-state cooperation commission was stillborn after Cihuatlan's leaders rejected it, and a series of meetings with the Lt. Governor of Colima led nowhere), Jalisco's attitude stiffened. In early June, Colima police arrested nine Jalisco residents working on a bridge in the disputed zone and held them for several days. This action prompted Governor Emilio Gonzalez (PAN) to deploy additional police units to the area to safeguard Jalisco's interests. Guzman told the CG in late June that the situation was "very worrisome" and no solution was in sight. A number of additional incidents between the opposing parties have since occurred, so far without any major injuries.

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In Comes the Army:  
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¶8. The latest development in the continuing boundary saga was the July 7th announcement by Federal Secretary of the Interior Francisco Ramirez Acuna that Army troops would be deployed immediately in the disputed area to help maintain order. Both state governors agreed to the plan, but Colima residents could not help noting that Ramirez Acuna is a former governor of Jalisco. The Deputy Secretary of the Interior is now attempting to broker an accord between the two states. It also appears that the boundary problem will once again be referred to the Senate, with little prospect of a quick resolution.

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Comment: A Problem Nobody Needs

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¶9. Neither Governor desired a border conflict at this particular moment, but neither can afford politically to back down for fear of being branded a modern-day "Santa Ana" (the Mexican President who lost Texas and the Southwest to the United States). But Colima and Jalisco need each other; Manzanillo is Guadalajara's gateway to the Pacific, and the road and rail links between the two states desperately need additional investment if western Mexico is to maintain and increase its competitiveness in the global economy. Jalisco residents flock to Colima's beaches for recreation (they are actually closer to Guadalajara than those around Puerto Vallarta) while many Colima citizens travel to Guadalajara for higher education, shopping, or business. Certainly both states have better uses for the police officers now deployed on the border, where their ability to combat narco traffickers, or even common criminals, is very limited.

¶10. Leaders of both states recognize their symbiotic dependence on each other. The real danger is that hotheads at the local level could provoke an incident that would further harden positions. In truth, it is the local residents that have the most to lose from the conflict; while the standoff continues, private investment in the area will be hindered, and neither state is able or willing to fund public works in the disputed zone. In the end, it may be this realization, rather than the cops, soldiers, lawyers, or politicians, that convinces the two municipalities to come together and reach an agreement for the good of both. Post will continue to monitor the situation and report developments.

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